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USSR-US: Brezhnev suggests naval activity restraint.
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[USSR-US: Soviet party leader Brezhnev has tied yet another string to the bow of arms control proposals he presented on 30 March at the Soviet party congress.

According to a TASS summary of his speech yesterday in Moscow, Brezhnev intimated that the USSR would welcome discussions aimed at restraining great power naval deployments "at the other end of the world, away from native coasts." He professed Moscow's readiness to "solve" this problem by making an "equal bargain," and offered to discuss any proposals.

Brezhnev's comments seem aimed, in part, at maintaining the momentum of Moscow's "peace offensive" with yet another gesture to be portrayed as a new Russian initiative aimed at reducing East-West tension. The remarks also reflect Soviet sensitivity to accusations that Moscow's increasing naval activity points to expansionist aims, and Brezhnev tried to turn these charges back onto the US. He alluded to US naval deployments in the Mediterranean--"hard by the Soviet Union"--and in the Far East, and he complained that, although the US contends these are "normal and natural," the US has launched a propaganda campaign against Soviet naval activity "in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and other seas."

Although Moscow has a clear interest in seizing the public initiative, in suggesting naval restraint, and in trying to put the US on the defensive, the Soviets are probably motivated by more than a mere tactical desire to engage in grandstanding. The Soviets had earlier probed, in more guarded fashion, US willingness to consider limiting great power competition in the Indian Ocean, and this may be the area of primary concern to them. In a conversation with Secretary Rogers on 26 March, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin asked "informally" for US reaction to the idea of a "declaration" to the effect that the Indian Ocean should be "free of military bases and fleet concentrations." (That the issue was a topical]

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[One in Moscow was confirmed just four days later when Brezhnev, in his congress speech, made a point of criticizing "imperialists" who allegedly search for signs of a Soviet threat "in the depths of the Indian Ocean.")

The Soviets are doubtless aware of press speculation that the US, having reviewed the situation in the Indian Ocean, may propose some kind of regional arms control arrangement. Brezhnev's remarks yesterday may have been timed in part to pre-empt and upstage any such US initiative, and at the same time to increase pressures against possible US plans to strengthen its naval presence in the area.

Moscow seems particularly sensitive to the possibility that the US might be considering deploying ballistic missile submarines on regular patrol in the Indian Ocean, and appears determined to do its best to prevent this. In view of Moscow's genuine concern on this score, Brezhnev's unusually explicit suggestion that an "equal bargain" might be struck is particularly intriguing. The Soviet leaders may possibly wish to float the idea of some kind of trade-off, whereby the USSR would undertake to exercise some restraint with respect to Soviet naval activity close to US shores in return for limitations on US deployments in the Indian Ocean.

The Soviet leader's speech came two days after the US responded positively, through diplomatic channels, to a Soviet suggestion last fall that a US delegation come to Moscow to discuss ways of preventing untoward incidents at sea. The Soviets may see advantage in fostering the impression that Brezhnev's words and the US move are related, that the initiative is predominantly Moscow's, and that ensuing US-Soviet discussions may deal with more far-reaching concerns, in addition to the more limited business of incidents at sea. Moreover, the Soviets probably anticipate that Washington's allies, who have just been informed of the planned talks, may see in Brezhnev's overture some reason for doubt that they are being kept fully informed.

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